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ABSTRACT

In 1980, the Sioux Falls Area Press Association in South Dakota attempted to devise a political debate procedure and format that would serve both the candidates and the public. Involving the candidates for the first and second district congressional races and for the United States senate, the televised debates, entitled "Election 80," began with introductory statements by each of the candidates. The programs then featured a debate between the candidates, followed by a press conference, during which a panel of South Dakota journalists questioned the candidates. The programs concluded with statements by each of the candidates. To promote direct clash and effective argument, the questions approved for use in the three political debates were simple and clear and covered issues that reflected both the public's and the candidates' agendas. The candidates were also informed in advance about the subjects to be covered and were allowed to use notes and materials. So that the political candidates could be set against each other on key issues in the campaign, the press was removed from the debate phase of the program. Further modification of this debate format would provide an opportunity for the candidates to question each other and to allow reporters to follow up on initial questions directed to a candidate. (HOD)

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CRITERIA AND FORMAT TO OPTIMIZE POLITICAL DEBATES: AN ANALYSIS OF SOUTH DAKOTA'S "ELECTION 80" SERIES

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SCA National Convention
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Since 1974 I have been interested in--and involved in--debate as a vehicle to facilitate intelligent citizen evaluation of candidates for major political office in the United States. Debate could contribute much to politics. This potential motivated Lloyd Bitzer and Theodore Rueter to undertake their comprehensive critique of the 1976 presidential debates. They prefaced their indictment of the Carter and Ford debates as follows: "The free expression of ideas, so cherished by Americans, must be accompanied by the practice of debate . . . If guided by rules of evidence and codes of fairness, debate sifts truth from error and moves us closer to (what Walter Lippman refers to as) 'moral and political truth'."[1] Yet, despite this potential, debate has to date failed to substantively contribute to politics. The fault lies with procedure and format, which bear a closer resemblance to the traditional press conference than to "genuine debate."[2] The press conference is, of course, an important and useful institution. But, it does not--and cannot--facilitate genuine debate between political candidates.

An effective format can optimize the marriage between debate and politics. This marriage would better serve the candidates and the public. It is the public who has the most to gain. As Austin Ranney has observed, "...the candidates' prospects are not the only stake. There is also the stake of the American people in having presidential campaigns organized and conducted in a manner most likely to provide them with correct information about the candidates' personal qualities and positions on the issues."[3] To date political debates have served the candidates and not the public. I contend that procedure and format are to blame. Yet, past failings are readily reversible with the inclusion of "debate experts" in the planning of future political debates. This step would insure

the needed fine-tuning of procedure and format which would optimize the significant potential of political debates to serve the public.[4] This call for revision in procedure and format has been issued repeatedly. Norman Lear, of The Task Force on Televised Presidential Debates, concluded that, "I believe that a format can be developed for the discussion of important issues wherein partisans on both sides meet each other head-on, moderated by an individual whose sole purpose is to steer the debate, allowing no participant to avoid a question or a challenge."[5] In classic understatement Bitzer and Rueter posed the following challenge, "Human ingenuity surely can devise methods and formats of . . . . debate calculated to serve the public interest, while at the same time allowing the candidates to advance their causes."[6]

In 1980 South Dakota launched a genuine attempt to meet the challenge of devising a political debate procedure and format to serve both the candidates and the public. The Sioux Falls Area Press Association asked me to participate in the planning and implementation of televised political debates involving the candidates for the first and second district congressional races and for the United States Senate. I suggested a criteria--and a format--to maximize the promise of political debate. The Sioux Falls Area Press Association accepted my proposal without amendment. It was used in three televised debates which were aired on successive Wednesdays during the month of October. Furthermore, an attempt was made to evaluate the "Election 80" series format in comparison with the format used in the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate. A questionnaire was submitted to the 16 journalists, who planned and/or participated in the press phase of the programs, and to the six candidates, who debated and then answered the questions from the press. The survey contained both closed- and open-ended

questions. The closed-ended questions compared the "Election 80" debate format to the Carter and Reagan debate format based on specific criteria. Since political debates ought to promote matched agendas, intelligent/informed clash, and appropriately directed clash, questions were posed which attempted to provide a comparative assessment of the relative effectiveness of the two formats in maximizing this criteria. A five-point Likert Scale was used. All of the responses to each of the questions were computed and an overall response rating was obtained. The ratings of the responses to the two debates were compared, and the difference was calculated in terms of the aggregate change and the percentage change. The open-ended questions asked respondents to comment with regard to the criteria, format, or questions which characterized the "Election 80" televised debates. The results were tabulated in terms of clusters of responses. First each comment was identified and labeled; then comments which appeared more than once were grouped; finally comment clusters which appeared at least three times were sorted out. This paper will focus on the format, the criteria, and an evaluation of the "Election 80" televised debates.

The Format

South Dakota Public Television aired three 60-minute programs. The programs were entitled, "Election 80." Each program began with introductory statements by each of the candidates; then each program featured a debate between the candidates; the debate was followed by a press conference, during which a panel of South Dakota journalists questioned the candidates; finally, each program concluded with closing statements by each of the candidates. The first debate involved Democrat Ken Stofferan and Republican Clint Roberts, candidates for the House of Representatives from South Dakota's second congressional district. The second debate featured in-

cumbent Democrat Tom Daschle and Republican challenger Bart Kull, candidates for the House of Representatives from South Dakota's first congressional district. The third debate pitted incumbent Democrat George McGovern against Independent challenger Wayne Peterson for the U.S. Senate.[7] The elements of the format are highlighted below.

INTRODUCTION PHASE--6 minutes

Moderator: 2 minutes
Candidate A: 2 minutes
Candidate B: 2 minutes

THE DEBATE PHASE--30 minutes

Five or six issues were covered (depending on whether the candidates fully utilized their alloted time in their initial and rebuttal responses). The format for each issue was:

Moderator (direction & question): 30 seconds
Candidate B's initial response: 2 minutes
Candidate A's initial response: 2 minutes
Candidate B's rebuttal: 45 seconds
Candidate A's rebuttal: 45 seconds

Speaking order alternated between questions.

THE PRESS CONFERENCE PHASE--18 minutes

Moderator (introduction): 2 minutes

A panelist addressed a single question to one of the candidates within the following time frame:

Panelist's question: 30 seconds
Candidate's response: 90 seconds

A total of eight or nine questions were asked, alternating between the two candidates. Panelists were instructed to draw their questions from material raised during the debate.

CONCLUSION PHASE--6 minutes

Candidate A: 2½ minutes
Candidate B: 2½ minutes
Moderator: 1 minute

Criteria and Evaluation

Criterion 1: Matched Agendas

Three possible issue agendas might be used in political debates--the journalist's, the candidates', and/or the public's. The three agendas, however, often conflict. Past political debates have virtually ignored the public's agenda. A Cleveland State University study of the 1960 and the 1976 presidential debates found that, on balance, participants in those debates spent only 5 to 10 percent of the total time available addressing issues which were "on the public's mind."[8] In 1976 data provided by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center identified unemployment and inflation as the two dominant issues on the public's mind at the time of the debates. Yet, Cleveland State University researchers, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck and Robert G. Meadow, found that a mere three percent of the journalist's questions concerned inflation, while only 11 percent dealt with unemployment.[9] A political debate ought to match--to the extent possible--the agendas of the candidates and the public. This is not to suggest that the press abrogate its traditional agenda-setting role. To the contrary, it seems clear that the press is the primary source of the public's issue agenda. The press, prior to the debates, has already influenced the public's issue agenda. The data are clear, however, that in past political debates press panelists did not even reflect the media's agenda in their questioning of the candidates. A study of the 1976 Carter and Ford debates by Linda S. Swanson and David L. Swanson of the University of Illinois revealed that the agenda of the debates (as determined by the questions asked) and the agenda of the news media at the time of the debates correlated only .22.[10] In short, the journalists' questions have virtually ignored the public's agenda (at

least in 1960 and in 1976), and have even failed to properly reflect the media's agenda (in 1976).

The issue agendas used in political debates should be the public's and the candidates'. Issues must be selected which are on the public's mind and which reflect important differences between the candidates. This criterion was used by the Sioux Falls Press Association in the televised House and Senate debates. The candidates for each of the three debates were asked to advocate and defend their positions on five or six pre-selected issues--chosen on the basis of relevance, as determined by timely public opinion polls,[11] and on the basis of potential clash, as determined by actual differences between the candidates on the issues. In the first debate, involving Ken Stofferan and Clint Roberts, questions were drawn from five issue areas: solutions to inflation, hard versus soft energy choices, a tax cut, nuclear versus conventional force emphasis, and water development. Although polls identified agriculture as an important public concern, it was not used in the debate because the candidates' positions virtually coincided. In the second debate, between Tom Daschle and Bart Kull, the questions focused on: solutions to a stagnant economy, strategies to reduce inflation, the role of government in promoting agriculture, the adequacy of America's defenses, draft registration, and water development. In the third debate, involving George McGovern and Wayne Peterson, the following issues were covered: the obligation of a political candidate to debate his opponent, solutions to slow growth and to inflation, the need for new strategic weapons' systems, seniority and the promotion of agriculture, and responsiveness versus responsibility. These issues reflected both the public's and the candidates' agendas.

On the criterion of matched agendas, neither the closed-ended nor the open-ended section of the "Election 80" questionnaire indicated a difference

between the three South Dakota debates and the Carter and Reagan debate. The closed-ended section used two survey items which were designed to measure the criterion of matched agendas. The first item, "The questions which were asked the candidates during the debate reflected the major issues on the public's mind," showed absolutely no change. The second item, "The questions which were asked the candidates during the debate reflected issue differences between the candidates," indicated a -.1875 (4.69%) rating for the "Election 80" debates compared to the Carter and Reagan debate. The open-ended section of the questionnaire revealed no cluster on the criterion of matched agendas. I can only speculate concerning possible reasons for this finding. It is possible that the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate bested past presidential debates in addressing those issues on the public's mind (there was certainly more ideological distance between Carter and Reagan than between Ford and Carter or between Kennedy and Nixon). It is also possible that the journalist respondents, who comprised three-fourths of the "Election 80" questionnaire survey, were either reluctant to concede this failing (that journalists' questions poorly reflect the public's agenda) or were unaware of the public's agenda in the three South Dakota races. In any event, Austin Ranney reminds us of the importance of debate agendas when he concludes that, "The topics which are being discussed are just as much a part of a debate as the words which the candidates speak."[12]

Criterion 2: Intelligent Clash

Two important considerations underpin the notion of intelligent clash. First, candidates must be encouraged to answer the question--and to remain on the topic. This has posed a serious problem in past political debates. The Cleveland State University study cited previously found that, in the 1960 presidential debates, Kennedy was able to stay on the topic embodied in the question only 34 percent of the time; Nixon a mere 27 percent of the time.[13] The same

study reported that, while in the 1976 debates the candidates fared better, they still strayed from the topic significantly. In 1976 Carter stayed on the topic 46 percent of the time; Ford a robust 62 percent of the time.[14] These findings are important--and discouraging. Clash is the essence of genuine debate. Yet, clash has been notably absent in past political debates. Second, the candidates must be encouraged to respond logically and factually. This was not possible during the 1976 presidential debates because of the impromptu nature of the questions and the requirement that the candidates not use notes. Hence, Bitzer and Rueter found that 226 factual, interpretive, and logical errors were committed by the candidates during the 1976 debates (155 by Ford and 79 by Carter).[15] Virtually all standards of logic and evidence were violated by the candidates.

To promote direct clash and effective argument the following recommendations are essential. First, questions must be phrased simply and clearly. This has been a recurrent problem in past political debates. Bitzer and Rueter reported that in the 1976 Carter and Ford debates one-fourth of the questions were multiple; yet, only 16 percent of the multiple questions were answered "fully or completely in original or followup speeches."[16] In addition, in the third debate a total of 13 questions exceeded 30 seconds in length (of the 14 original questions, 12 exceeded 30 seconds).[17] In short, most of the questions asked in the 1976 presidential debates were far too complex and too long. It is a small wonder that the candidates failed to succinctly answer the journalists' questions.

The questions approved for use by the Sioux Falls Area Press Association in the three televised political debates were simple and clear. As a result the candidates felt compelled to answer the questions (their failure to do so would have been readily apparent to journalists and viewers). A sampling of the questions which were used illustrates this point. In the Stofferan and Roberts de-

bate the candidates were asked: "How much of a tax cut--if any--can we afford at this time?" In the Daschle and Kull debate the candidates were asked: "What specific measures do you advocate to reduce the rate of inflation?" In the McGovern and Roberts debate the candidates were asked: "Should a candidate for the United States Senate be expected to face his opponent in public debate on the issues? Why or why not?" All of the questions which were used contained a single idea In addition, all of the questions were phrased in a simple sentence.

Two additional recommendations would promote direct clash and effective argument. On the one hand, candidates should be told the topics--or areas--in advance of the debate. There is no good reason for keeping the candidates in the dark concerning the subjects to be probed during the debate. Debate is not a vehicle to test the candidate's ability at impromptu speech. Rather, debate should afford an opportunity to learn the candidate's position on an issue and its superiority or inferiority when compared to the other candidate's position. Thus, once the agenda has been determined, the candidates should be informed of the subjects which will be the focus of the debate. In addition, candidates should be allowed notes and materials. Candidates cannot be expected to be completely accurate in using facts or figures if they must cite them from memory. Yet, factual accountability is a must in a debate (too many candidates for public office in the United States misuse facts and figures). The candidates must be allowed to bring--and to use--notes and materials on the topics which are scheduled to be debated. Only then can the candidate be held fully accountable for factual misrepresentations. The Sioux Falls Area Press Association informed the candidates involved in the three televised debates about the subjects to be covered--in advance. Also, the candidates were allowed to use notes and materials.

In terms of the criterion of intelligent clash, the "Election 80" questionnaire detected a large difference between the three South Dakota debates and the Carter and Reagan debate. Both the closed- and the open-ended sections confirmed the superiority of the "Election 80" procedure and format. The closed-ended section used two survey items which were designed to measure the criterion of intelligent clash. The first item, "The questions that were asked the candidates during the debate facilitated direct and relevant answers from the candidates," showed a +1.0675 (26.69%) margin of superiority for the "Election 80" debates over the Carter and Reagan debate. The second item, "The format which was used for the debate facilitated the candidates' use of logic and facts in responding to questions which were asked during the debate," indicated a +.938 (23.45%) increment of superiority for the "Election 80" debates. The open-ended section of the questionnaire identified the "promotion of clash" as one of the strengths of the "Election 80" procedure and format. Nearly one-third of all responses affirmed this strength. A sampling of the responses illustrates this position. "...Questions were worded to get specific points of view...to make a candidate stand his ground." "It ('Election 80') allowed viewers to see the differences between the two candidates." "Unlike the Carter/Reagan debate, the candidates were unable to sidestep the questions... This made the clash more evident to the viewer...debates should be an outlet for the serious questioning of candidates to pin them down on those issues that will seriously affect their voting constituency."

Criterion 3: Appropriately Directed Clash

Political debates should be between the candidates--not between journalists and candidates. Unfortunately, political debates to date have pitted candidates

against the press. For example, Bitzer and Rueter found that in the 1976 Carter and Ford debates: more than half of the questions contained arguments;[18] 14 of the 63 questions contained an attitude of "omniscience" (talked down to the candidates);[19] 41 of the 63 questions were considered "hostile" to the candidates;[20] and 7 of the 9 panelists engaged in direct refutation of the candidates in posing their questions.[21] The press should, of course, conform to its proper adversarial role. However, political debates work best when the candidates are allowed to assume that role for themselves (that is, after all, the nature of debate). The 1976 journalists-versus-candidates debates produced predictable results: most of the candidates' remarks were directed to the panelists, and not to the opposition candidate. This ultimately worked to Ford's disadvantage as the debates wore on. For example, according to Bitzer and Rueter: in debate one, of Carter's 41 units (response segments), 25 were directed to the panel and 16 to Ford; of Ford's 32 units, 19 were directed to the panel and 13 to Carter.[22] By the third debate, however, Ford found himself under increasing attack from the panelists. In debate three, of Carter's 44 units, 22 were directed to the panelists and 22 to Ford; of Ford's 29 units, 24 were directed to the panel and 5 to Carter.[23] This prompted Bitzer and Rueter to conclude: "had we known before the third debate that the panel's questions would be so hostile to Ford in both substance and in tone, and had other factors in the debate remained constant, then we should have been able to predict the following outcomes with a strong degree of probability: (1) Ford would need to debate the panel--he did; (2) Carter would win--he did; and (3) the panel would play a large role in determining the outcome of the debate--which it did."[24]

Political debates should pit one candidate against the other on the key issues in the campaign. To accomplish this, the Sioux Falls Area Press Association took

a courageous and selfless step in agreeing to remove the press from the debate phase of the program. Instead, a moderator posed the five or six questions (selected for balance in addition to the criteria noted previously) to the candidates, who debated one another. In short, the candidates assumed the role of adversaries. Participants in both the first and the second of the three debates commented that the format was one of the fairest that they had seen. The journalists, however, played an important role in the debates. The final 18 minutes were devoted to a traditional press conference--during which a panel of three South Dakota journalists questioned the candidates on content raised during the debate. Thus, the candidates debated; and then the journalists asked questions.

The candidates expressed their satisfaction with the format, which afforded an opportunity to participate in genuine debate on the issues. The journalists also expressed support for the format, since the press continued to serve an important function in the program (despite being removed from the debate phase itself). In terms of the criterion of appropriately directed clash, the "Election 80" questionnaire uncovered a substantial difference between the three South Dakota debates and the Carter and Reagan debate. The closed-ended section used two survey items which were designed to measure the criterion of appropriately directed clash. The first item, "The questions which were asked the candidates during the debate were worded--and asked--to facilitate fairness and balance," indicated a +.8125 (20.31%) margin of superiority for the "Election 80" debates over the Carter and Reagan debate. The second item, "The format which was used for the debate afforded a role for journalist participants which was appropriate in a political debate setting," showed a +1.0 (25%) increment of superiority for the "Election 80" debates. The open-ended section of the questionnaire identified "appropriately directed clash"

as one of the strong features of the "Election 80" procedure and format. One response typifies the reaction. "It ('Election 80') provided a debate setting... Most of the other debates, both on a local and a national level, are nothing but press conferences, where the questioners are mainly looking for the next day's headline rather than trying to draw out the real differences between the candidates and inform the viewers about the issues."

There is additional evidence to bolster the claim that the American public wants more direct clash in political debates. Public opinion surveys, which were completed following the 1976 Ford and Carter presidential debates, found that, of those expressing an opinion, most preferred a more direct exchange of views between opposing candidates.[25]

Further Format Modification Needed

The "Election 80" questionnaire uncovered two shortcomings in the experimental political debate format. First, candidate clash could be further enhanced by providing an opportunity for the candidates to question each other. This could be accomplished by inserting cross-examination into the format. A sampling of the open-ended responses illustrates: "...have the candidates challenge each other's thoughts and answers..." "I would like to see the candidates question each other directly. Now that's clash!" "I would prefer...a debate style where the candidates are alone with each other and their thoughts with perhaps a moderator to keep things in check, but otherwise letting the candidates have at each other." Second, the press conference phase could be revised by allowing reporters to follow up on initial questions directed to a candidate. This might be accomplished by providing each reporter an uninterrupted questioning period--as opposed to the use of the rotating of reporters and questions. The open-ended phase of the "Election 80" questionnaire verified this need. "Journalists should

be given a chance to follow up their questions or ask for clarification." "The format prevented the questioner from following up." "Questioners weren't allowed enough opportunity for follow-up questions." "...journalist participants should be allowed (even urged) to stop a candidate from rambling around a question."

Conclusion

The Sioux Falls Area Press Association sponsored "Election 80" series was a step in the direction advocated by Bitzer and Rueter. A format was utilized which facilitated a more productive marriage between debate and politics, thus serving both the candidates and the public. Additional refinement in the format is still needed, for as Lee Hanna, who negotiated the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate on behalf of the League of Women Voters, concluded, "...debate is such a powerful instrument in molding public opinion that it is in need of constant refinement."[26]

NOTES

[1]Lloyd Bitzer and Theodore Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford: The Counterfeit Debates of 1976 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 3.

[2]Bitzer and Rueter distinguish between contemporary political debate (with its many shortcomings) and genuine debate (the ideal). See Bitzer and Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford, p. 11.

[3]Austin Ranney, Past and Future of Presidential Debates, ed. by Austin Ranney (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979), editor's preface.

[4]An excellent summary of the existing data on the impact of televised debates is provided by Steven H. Chaffee. See Steven H. Chaffee, "Presidential Debates--Are They Helpful to Voters," Communication Monographs, 45 (November, 1987), pp. 328-346.

[5]Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Televised Presidential Debates, With the Nation Watching (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1979), p. 15.

[6]Bitzer and Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford, p. 4.

[7]Republican nominee, James Abdnor, chose to decline the invitation of "Election 80" to participate in the televised debate. In fact, Representative Abdnor declined all invitations to face Senator McGovern in debate during the 1980 campaign. As a result, the obligation of a prospective Senate candidate to debate became one of the dominant issues in the campaign.

[8]"Presidential Debates: The Gap Between Issues and Answers," Psychology Today, January 1980, p. 20.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Linda L. Swanson and David L. Swanson, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the First Ford-Carter Debate," Communication Monographs, 45 (November 1978), p. 351.

[11]The Augustana Research Institute conducted extensive state-wide polling during the weeks prior to the election. The polls identified the major issues involved in each of the three races in addition to other information.

[12]Ranney, Past and Future of Presidential Debates, p. 21.

[13]Psychology Today, January 1980, p. 20.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Bitzer and Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford, p. 173.

[16]Bitzer and Rueter, pp. 54 & 57.

[17]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 57.

[18]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 60.

[19]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 63.

[20]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 65.

[21]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 62.

[22]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 115.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Bitzer and Rueter, p. 75.

[25]James Karayn, "Presidential Debates--A Plan for the Future" (Paper prepared for the American Enterprise Institute Conference on the Future of Presidential Debates, Washington, D.C., October 1977; later retitled, "The Case for Permanent Presidential Debates"), p. 15.

[26]Lee Hanna, "An Insider's View of the Debates," Manhattan Weekend, Daily News, November 15, 1980, p. 3.